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Music

Computer Software That Can Turn You Into a Songwriter

By MICHAEL WALKER

I'M not a musician, but I recently composed and recorded a song. More than that, in a Paul McCartneyesque fit of post-Beatles hubris, I played all the instruments and produced and engineered the entire thing, even though I have no experience producing and engineering anything more complicated than a Bombay martini.

The title is "Eventide," meant to evoke not some ye olde troubadour's serenade but the trademark I glimpsed on a fearsome-looking piece of sound reinforcement equipment backstage at a Ted Nugent concert. "Eventide" is four blistering minutes and 31 seconds long; it features three electric guitars, electric bass, grand piano, electric piano, two string sections, synthesizer, drums, congas, bongos, tambourine and shaker. I think it's smashing, frankly — the old "Avengers" theme smudged with the dark atmospherics of Sigur Ros.

There's just one thing: I didn't compose "Eventide" any more than Ashlee Simpson sang "Pieces of Me" on "Saturday Night Live." The song sprang from computer-sampled snippets of musical instruments that I stitched together using Apple Computer's GarageBand software. GarageBand is a denatured version of industry-standard recording software that allows amateurs to cobble together a song using nothing but the program's digital instruments. You preview the samples from a Chinese-menu-like array, drag them into a virtual mixing console, push them this way and that, and voilà! The software automatically renders the composition into a tidy audio file that can be posted to Web sites like MySpace.com, which teems with thousands of MP3 files from would-be Coldplays and Alicia Keyeses.

The process is so seamless and absorbing that I can't really recall how "Eventide" came together. Did I start with the "80's Pop Beat No. 09"? The "Modern Rock Guitar No. 14.1"? The "Edgy Rock Bass No. 01.1"? All I know is that at some point, "Eventide" began to coalesce around a keyboard figure, "Classic Rock Piano No. 06," and the dreamy "70's Ballad Strings 02." It was like watching a Polaroid photograph develop, except that I could fuss with the image as it came into focus. By then I had stacked up seven instruments I didn't know how to play into a song I didn't know how to write.

Given my total inexperience at composing, the result should have sounded ridiculous; instead, it sounded pretty cool. The repeating digital loops could have caused "Eventide" to seem less like a song and more like Booker T. and the MG's vamping until Otis Redding strutted from the wings to wail "Mr. Pitiful." But a click and a drag transposed the key of the song heavenward a couple of notches — an old trick of country music composers, among others, the final chorus of "I Will Always Love You" being an excruciating example.

I built "Eventide" a "bridge," a pile-driving chorus of strings, tambourine, piano and scorching guitar. For the finale, I merely copied the opening and pasted it onto the end, fiddled with each instrument until none was too loud or too soft — my ham-fisted equivalent of mixing — and slapped some cymbal crashes onto the last few bars to tart up the climax.

And so I was done. Now it was time for the song to meet its public. I uploaded it to MySpace's music section, the Web's largest clearinghouse of self-recorded music with more than 600,000 bands, the majority amateurs.

Almost immediately, I got a message from an indie band in Brooklyn asking if I'd add them to my "Friends" list. With 66 million MySpace subscribers, to rise above the fray — and perhaps attract the attention of a record company executive — the goal is to link one's page to as many other MySpace members as possible, called an "add," just like in radio. (The Brooklyn band had already amassed more than 136,000.) Log-rolling is rampant. "hey I'll help promote ur band ... and whoreing u if u would add me,"

someone forthrightly posted on one band's MySpace page.

"Eventide" scored only five listens until I got five other bands to add me to their lists. Thereafter, it scored just two more. My tour of MySpace was beginning to feel suspiciously like the nonvirtual world of agents and editors, the capricious gatekeepers the Internet was supposed to usurp.

So I decided to play "Eventide" for Nic Harcourt, the host and musical director of "Morning Becomes Eclectic" on the public radio station KCRW in Santa Monica. I also wanted to discuss with him the implications of songwriting software. Was a song written by a nonmusician using nothing but digital loops as legitimate as one by a traditional composer?

"What music software does," he told me, "is enable people who perhaps have a rudimentary understanding of music to flex their creative muscles, even if they don't have any musical training, and I think that's good. I mean, let's be honest: a lot of people who don't have musical training make hit records."

"To me it's just another barrier coming down," he added. "We're putting the power back into the hands of the artists."

Including an "artist" such as myself?

"How a listener chooses to respond to music made with this technology," Mr. Harcourt said, "depends on what they expect from a song. If you don't expect much, then listening to a piece of music that's been sort of thrown together with samples can probably be satisfying. If you expect poetry and composition in the tradition of great songwriters. ..."

Well, he had a point. Plus, aside from a bit of haphazard enthusiasm, there was no emotional force behind my song. Maybe it showed.

While "Eventide" languished on MySpace, Mr. Harcourt telephoned one afternoon and announced, "We're going to listen to it right now."

I'd told him from the beginning that, as a nonmusician, I had no ego attached to "Eventide." I'd told myself the same thing, even as I listened to it over and over, liking it more and more with each playing. But now, I was appalled to realize, I really cared what he thought.

Then, through the phone, I heard my song trickling out of Mr. Harcourt's laptop speakers. Now that it was playing outside the Carnegie Hall of my mind, the song suddenly sounded not cool at all but, in fact, ridiculous. I could picture Mr. Harcourt's lip curling in disgust. Thirty seconds passed. He asked, "Is there a vocal on it?"

I heard myself bleat, "No, but hang in there — we're coming up to the bridge."

"Eventide" clunked away a few seconds more. Then I heard the middle section's keyboard and strings swoosh in. It sounded marginally less awful.

Mr. Harcourt announced, "Sounds like you could be on a Windham Hill record." And finally, "It sounded fine."

I realized that he had shifted to the past tense. And that I couldn't hear "Eventide" anymore. He'd turned the song off halfway through.

I blurted, "But you're missing the big build!"

I asked Mr. Harcourt what he'd think if he had heard the song cold. He paused, then said: "I'd be like, O.K., it's a piece of film music. You know what I mean? It's not a song." He added: "It sounds ... O.K. It doesn't sound like a songwriter wrote it. It sort of sounds like a computer generated it."

And there he had me. A computer had generated it. I had helped things along but was more of a spectator. Nevertheless, "Eventide" was something I had created, and like all creations was entitled to a measure of emotional exuberance from its creator. So what if it had died on the vine at MySpace and Mr. Harcourt considered it "you know, film music"?

And maybe there was hope. Mr. Harcourt had tantalizingly pointed out, "Somebody's going to put together a song this way that's going to find its way around the Internet that will end up becoming a hit."

Perhaps "Eventide." Or maybe Windham Hill will go for it.

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